

A Review of *Medusa's Hair*

In her review of my book, *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience* (*JAS* 42, no. 2 [1983]: 442–44), Margaret Trawick Egnor takes issue with my use of psychoanalysis in the study of cultural symbols. She says that she is a “non-Freudian” and also a skeptic as far as psychoanalysis is concerned (p. 443). Yet she ends up by psychoanalyzing the author. In relation to one of my informants, Sada Sami, Egnor says: “In this rare personage he [Obeyesekere] quickly learns to see a ‘myth dreamer,’ a ‘Gawain,’ a ‘Saint George,’ a ‘Perseus cutting off Medusa’s head with its swarms of snake hair,’ and finally a conqueror of ‘his father, a huge monster who will not permit him to take on a new office.’ Yet none of these grandiose appellations fits at all the man that Obeyesekere describes. Rather it seems that, in his vision of this informant, the anthropologist has found himself.” The implication is clear: it is myself that I present in my informant, and it is my hang-up with my father that I describe.

Much of this is Egnor’s own invention. In my book I state clearly that Sada Sami is *not* an inventor of myths, “the evidence does not warrant such an inference” (p. 190). He is a myth dreamer, someone who dreams myths from a preexisting repertoire, and I gave two examples of his myth dreams. As for identifying him with other well-known heroes of myth, my text reads as follows: “One cannot but be struck by the similarity of Sada Sami’s adventures with other heroes of myth—Perseus cutting off Medusa’s head with its swarms of snake hair, or Gawain’s encounter with the Green Knight, or Saint George’s with the dragon. [These] were also probably spiritual adventures like Sada Sami’s but narrated as if they were real” (p. 190).

Similarity is not identity, and the intention of the chapter, and the preceding one, was to show that myths often derive from dreams as dreams derive from myths. The “grandiose appellations” given to Sada Sami are Egnor’s, not mine.

Egnor’s review is full of similar distortions of my position, but I think one must protest when a professional review has sunk to the level of a gratuitous psychoanalysis of the author.

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A Response to Gananath Obeyesekere

When I read *Medusa's Hair*, I was greatly impressed by Professor Obeyesekere’s honesty, courage, and compassion in his relations with and portrayal of his informants, and I hope that my admiration was conveyed in my review. At the same time, I was disturbed by some of his judgments regarding these informants—a reaction no doubt intensified by my *own* “hang-ups” with *my* father (a Freudian psychiatrist).

In particular, I was concerned with the degree to which Freudian theory can help us understand the hearts of women and of non-European people of either sex. I would certainly not reject Freud’s ideas or his methodology *in toto*.

I am especially sorry that Obeyesekere perceived as an attack my suggestion that he saw himself in one of his informants. I do not know whether Obeyesekere desires to conquer his father. What I was thinking of when I made this suggestion was his

professed revulsion toward Medusa, whatever she might mean to him, for I was unable to locate Medusa in any of Sada Sami's dreams. And is it not the anthropologist himself who turns his analytic mirror upon her?

In my review, I praised Obeyesekere for admitting to the presence, and significance, of deep emotional responses on his part toward his informants. Too many social (and natural) scientists attempt to conceal the effect of their own humanity on their work. Those who own up to their feelings are more vulnerable to charges of nonobjectivity than are their more close-mouthed colleagues, but the works of the former are, in my opinion, more truthful and more scientific.

Finally, I apologize for any "distortions" that may have been present in my review. Considerations of space did not allow me to do full justice to this very complex work.

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On Review of *Discipline*

Although I am aware that legitimate criticisms might be made regarding the thesis of my book, *Discipline: The Canonical Buddhism of the Vinayapīṭaka*, Robert Buswell, Jr. is wide of the mark in his recent review in *JAS* (42, no. 2 [1983]: 436–37). If I understand him correctly, his chief complaint is that I have "transposed" the significance of discipline for "the gradual path of spiritual development as outlined in the *Nikāyas*" by viewing it solely as an "end product" rather than as "the initial catalyst of the path of training" (p. 436). First, my thesis was not centrally concerned with complementary formulations of the path that can be found within the four *Nikāyas*, but with the specific manner in which discipline is understood within the context of *Vinaya* literature. Second, there are numerous occasions within the *Mahāvagga* account of the Buddha's missionary activities in which converts attain the Dhamma-Eye *suddenly* after hearing the Buddha preach the Four Noble Truths. Clearly, the text does not portray a "gradual path" in these instances. And finally, Buswell has obscured my interpretation by saying that discipline is viewed in my book only as an "end product." My point is that, as I indicate on page 84, discipline requires mindfulness. *Vinaya* is a mental discipline. But more importantly, and thus laying bare the inaccurate appraisal offered by Buswell, I state clearly toward the end of my discussion on *Upasāṃpadā* (pp. 115–16) that "discipline is the *means* by which the individual may demonstrate his worthiness to become a full-fledged member of the monastic order." I have not argued the exclusivity of discipline as an "end product" or as an "initial catalyst." Rather, I have simply demonstrated that the *Vinaya* sees discipline as an affective expression of Dhamma.

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